

Book Review: 1512 words

*Japanese Demon Lore. Oni from Ancient Times to the Present.* Reider, Noriko T. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2010

The concept of one size fits all is alluring. With regard to explaining the ecological, the social and the psyche, this concept is uniquely supplied in the Japanese Culture by the oni. The oni personifies the transmutable: the transmutable through all genders and through none; through this life and the next life; through matters personal and political; and through society visible and invisible. In addition, the oni exhibits emotions and attitudes ranging from the helpless to the hopeless to the hurtful as well as from the helpful to the endearing and to the inspiring.

With such versatile attributes, this uniquely Japanese creature has readily retained its role as an essential part of every generation and every era. Such durability begs the question: how to define and decipher such a transmutable entity. Such a task is the focus of *Japanese Demon Lore. Oni from Ancient Times to the Present*. Its author is the redoubtable Japanese scholar Noriko T. Reider whose academic interest is the correlation between the Japanese worldview and the oni.

The oni is a transmutable and ubiquitous being. Arising in the supernatural, the oni is an essential part of Japanese creativity, appearing in all genres ranging from formal literature to oral folklore as well as from the expressive arts to religion. In ancient times, the oni was predominantly characterised by demons and ogres. In modern times, however, the mass media portray the oni in films, graphics and pop culture as a more protective figure. The symbiotic evolution of the Japanese culture together with its defining character of the oni reflects the critical role of the oni in that society: the projection upon which the fundamental contradictions within society can be attached, can be named and can be contained.

As a projection, the oni holds the undesirable features. Bereft of the right to hold the norms of society such as good looks and decent habits, the oni hosts ugliness and atrocities such as cannibalism. Such categorisations, however, fail to account for the oni's transmutations, for example through all genders and none; as well as through inspiring fear to heralding prosperity, beauty and sexuality. Increasingly, the modern entertainment industry of theatre and the manga media includes a cute, lovable oni. This current depiction of the oni defies age categorisation as the manga media encompasses graphic comics and novels designed to appeal to Japanese of all ages.

In this book, Reider provides a detailed explanation of the oni. As the first English treatise on the oni, Reider elucidates the origins, depictions and ramifications of this omnipresent character which continually morphs with evolving societal expectations and explanations. The multifarious presentations also include a complex identification with untoward ecological events such as

abnormal weather patterns. For example, the oni accounts for thunder and lightning. Likewise, the oni accounts for the category of “others,” that is those who exist outside of the approved society.

The durability of the oni lies in its ability to transmute. The oni’s ability to shape shift accounts for its many and varied roles in Japanese society as well as its longevity over the millennia. From its ability to shift from a powerful god, to a member of the pantheon of monsters, to the sexy and frivolous as well as the endearing, Reider offers a detailed description. In addition, she does more than depict these roles; she supplies context and analysis.

As the prolific and thoughtful analyst of Japanese folklore, Reider interprets the oni’s role in each particular era. For example, in discussing the oni as an outsider to society, Reider cites the popular oni legend of Shuten Doji, whose nefarious deeds include abducting and devouring maidens. Finally, he is slain. Although decapitated, this omnipotent oni bites the helmet of Raiko, his killer. Reider considers how this legend could refer to a shipwrecked Spaniard and his crew or to metal workers in the mountains.

Reviewing the oni as the outsider, Reider notes the identification of the oni with the marginalised, with the anti establishment figures and with those silenced by authority. Arising in ancient times, the oni was traditionally characterised by outsiders such as demons and ogres. In modern times, however, the mass media portray the oni in films, graphics and pop culture as a more endearing figure. Currently, the tendency is to regard Shuten Doji as less a monster and more as one naively deceived.

In nine chapters, Reider arranges her exposition of the oni from ancient to medieval to modern times. She opens with an overview of the origins and the characteristics of the oni from Japanese, Chinese, Buddhist and Onmyodo perspectives. The less familiar Onmyodo perspective combines ancient Chinese roots with Buddhist astrology and native Japanese religion in an eclectic and esoteric practice.

Noteworthy is the invisibility of the shape shifting oni to account for untoward and unexpected events while reinforcing the requisite norms for society. With increasing visibility, the oni acquired the feared and antisocial attributes which ranged from cannibalism to rampant sexuality. Cannibalism is a convenient means to account for the absence of a body, to obviate the need to search for the missing person and to allow for grieving. Contemporaneously, however, the shape shifting oni are harbingers of beauty and prosperity.

Next, she reviews the ever popular story of Shuten Doji, the drunken demon. Although praising the centrality of the imperial authority, the story cunningly acknowledges the forthcoming emergence of the warrior class which will negate the need to depict the oni in this role. Also negated, but in the next chapter, is the need for the oni to be predominately male. Titled *Women Spurned, Revenge of Oni Women: Gender and Space*, this chapter acknowledges that the medieval period

created the fierce female oni who proved to be equally adapt at killing and devouring, often to their own destruction, as their male counterparts.

The role of the female oni continues in the fourth chapter which is headed: *Yamauba, the Mountain Ogress: Old Hag to Voluptuous Mother*. The movement of time from the medieval to the early modern is matched by a corresponding shift in the perception of the sexuality and nurturing qualities of the yamauba figure. Nonetheless, she remains a marginalised “other,” either as the known other, that is the familiar person who is exiled and living outside the community, or the unknown other, the stranger who is living far away. At this time, the oni continued to be visible in literary and visual arts but with a reduced hold on the perceptions of ordinary people. Complicit with this reduction was a marked decrease in the stigma associated with the demonic aspects of the oni.

The fifth chapter focuses on *Oni in the Urban Culture*. As part of the Early Modern period, the commercialisation of the Japanese culture included the commodification of the oni, especially in the entertaining and performing arts. Subsequently, the role of oni became a subject of debate as witnessed in the sixth chapter entitled *Oni and Japanese Identity*. As a means to encapsulate the “other,” the oni was a useful tool in defining foreigners and enemies of the Imperial State.

Morphing from the oni from a demonic agent of evil into a victim is the focus of the seventh chapter: *Sex, Violence and Victimization*. Modern portrayals are found in next chapter, which reviews the oni in the print and film media of Manga, Animation and Film. As the alienated other, the oni is at home in cyberspace and is most profitable for the multi dollar media businesses where the oni is used to cover a range of themes and geopolitical activities.

Reider concludes by examining *Oni without Negatives*. The current manifestation of the oni is as a kind and selfless creature depicting compassion. Such is the oni’s ability to transmute from demonic to goodness according to the shadow needs of Japanese society. As before, however, the stories remain didactic in order to portray the desired societal norms. For this reason, the oni remains a most useful concept, popular with the people and profitable with the owners of mass media, especially in kid literature business.

This book presents as a scholarly treatise on the transmutable and tenacious aspects of the oni as a cultural coping strategy adapting to time and circumstances. Throughout, Reider assumes a knowledge of Japanese folklore commensurate more with students of Japanese tradition than the general public. Thus, she rarely defines or explains significant words such as kami, marebito and mononoke as well as heroes such as Raiko, Kintaro and Semei.

Nonetheless, she reveals convincingly that the oni continues to have a use value in portraying societal norms in literature, the media and the performing arts. Noteworthy, the oni retains its array of characteristics morphing from coarse to elegant, from sexual to sedate, from personal to political as well as encapsulating the “other” whether alienated, disposed or anti-establishment.

Effectively, Reider explains why the Japanese retain this cost effective, efficient projection of their psyche in their cultural expressions.

Mary Gavan